

South Street Seaport, Piers 17 and 18  
From South Street into the East River at  
the base of Fulton Street  
New York  
New York County  
New York

HAER No. NY-156

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NY,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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South Street Seaport, Piers 17 and 18

HAER No. NY-156

Location: From South Street into the East River at the base of  
Fulton Street  
New York, New York County, New York

Quad: Jersey City

Date of Construction: 1906

Present Owner: City of New York  
Housing and Development Administration  
100 Cold Street  
New York, New York 10038

Present Use: Wharf and parking area

Significance: Piers 17 and 18, located in the South Street Historic  
District Extension, stand as physical evidence of the  
water-oriented economy of New York City in its  
developmental years. The current piers were built in  
1906 on the site of older piers dating to the  
eighteenth century. Wharves, ferry terminals and fish  
markets have been predominant in the district  
throughout its history, requiring and utilizing the  
construction and maintenance of the piers and  
significantly affecting the economy of the early city.

Project Information: The Army Corps of Engineers, in preparation for the  
removal of Piers 17 and 18 as part of the Collection  
and Removal of Drift Project, prepared this  
documentation. The structures were part of the South  
Street Historic District Extension.

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May 1981

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Piers 17 and 18 are timber pile structures, decked with concrete. Since 1906, when they were built for the city of New York, they have remained under public ownership. Pier 17 extends 518.4 feet from the South Street bulkhead and is 41.5 feet wide at its outer end. Pier 18 extended 557 feet from South Street when it was built, but in 1978 or 1979 its end broke off. It is now shorter than Pier 17 and is 42 feet wide [South Street Seaport Museum, n.d.].

The piers are adjacent to the Fulton Fish Market and are part of the South Street Seaport Historic District Extension. A floating hospital ship, no longer in use, and a machine shop barge are permanently moored alongside Pier 17. Occasional fishing boats dock at Pier 18. However, the piers are primarily used for parking by cars and trucks involved in fish market operations.

Piers have been in this location since early in New York City's history. Throughout the 19th century, the many activities performed at this site played a central role in the economy of the city. As New York's dependence on water-based commerce and transportation declined, the variety of waterfront activities at this location dwindled. The site of these piers is now a specialized market on the outskirts of the financial district. Current plans call for the demolition of these piers and for the construction of a pier platform to house a shopping mall in the hopes of revitalizing the area as a shopping district and tourist attraction.

The site of Piers 17 and 18 was previously a freight and passenger terminal as well as a major locus of general market activity throughout much of the 19th century. The land adjoining the piers is land-fill or "made land" as it was called by its builders. The process of shoreline extension is described by Stokes (1967), Harris (1980), and Kardas and Larrabee (1979). The State of New York made water grants to private individuals to lots under water in return for improvements made by the grantees to the lots. For example, Peter Schermerhorn received a water grant in 1804 for part of the site now adjacent to Piers 17 and 18. The grant stipulated that he pay to "build, erect, make and finish....a good sufficient and firm wharf or street....fronting on Beekman Slip" (now Fulton Street) [New York City 1804, E:96]. This apparently became South Street, the thoroughfare which now runs parallel to the East River in this area. In return, he received "all manner of wharfage, crannage, advantages and emoluments growing or accruing by or from so much of the said wharf or street" [Ibid. :97]. Thus was established the system of private ownership of New York City's waterfront structures, which continued until the twentieth century.

Eighteenth century maps show piers in the vicinity of the site of Piers 17 and 18. A 1797 map shows two wharves north of Beekman Slip (now Fulton Street): Moore's Wharf and Crane Wharf [Stokes 1967, vol. 1: pl. 64]. Crane Wharf was in the approximate location of Pier 18. A 1797 map [Stokes 1967, vol. 1: pl. 41] also shows a pier in that location. In 1811, an ordinance to build a 250-foot pier in the approximate location of Pier 17 was

presented to the Common Council of the City of New York [New York City 1917, vol. 6: 593]. The municipal corporation apparently owned this site because in 1814 Robert Fulton and William Cutting leased it from the city for the purpose of operating a ferry [New York City 1817, vol. 7: 398].

Crane Wharf (Pier 18) was probably rebuilt in conjunction with the construction of a market at this site in 1818-1821, because project plans included the cost of "filling in that part now covered with water and making the necessary Bulkhead and Piers...\$50,000.00 [New York City 1917, vol. 8: 394-398; New York County, 1903:31]. Already by this time the "wharves and bulkheads connected therewith (were) in a ruinous situation" [Ibid.:396]. After being built or rebuilt, the piers were numbered 22 and 23, corresponding to 17 and 18. This numbering began after 1815 and lasted until the early twentieth century [Albion 1939:221]. Although there appears to have been a suggestion in 1818 for the city to take the property in the location of Pier 18 for public use, at least part of the pier was in private hands when the city took possession of it in 1905 [New York County 1903].

In a letter quoted in Albion [1939:220-21], Fenimore Cooper described piers and pier construction in New York City in the early decades of the 19th century:

The time has not yet come for the formation of massive permanent quays in the harbor of New York. Wood is still too cheap, and labor too dear, for so heavy an investment of capital. All the wharves of New York are of very simple construction - A frame-work of hewn logs is filled with loose stone, and covered with a surface of trodden earth....The Americans....are daily constructing great ranges of these wooden piers, in order to meet the increasing demands of their trade [Ibid.]

By mid-century, cribwork piers were being replaced by timber pile structures (Albion 1939:222).

The use of cribwork and pile piers distinguished New York City's port from that of London, where a basin and locks provided ships with shelter, and from the port of Boston, which had expensive permanent stone wharves. The use of such piers may have conferred a competitive advantage upon New York because the relatively low capital investment required for pier construction meant that wharfage costs could be kept down. However, maintenance of the piers posed problems and in 1859 wharf owners petitioned the state legislature, which regulated wharfage rates, to increase the fees they collected because they claimed they could not afford to maintain the piers and slips [New York State 1859a]. Shipowners challenged their petition. The debate is recorded in New York State Senate documents [1859a; 1859b] and the New York State Harbor Commissioners Report 1856-1857. These sources offer an excellent picture of pier conditions in the mid-19th century.

Neither side contested the fact that the piers, wharves, and slips of the city were in a "miserable state" [New York State 1859a]. Slips were the sites of sewer outfalls as well as convenient spots to dispose of rubbish, cinder from steamship furnaces, ballast, and brick [New York State 1857; 1859a]. A dredging inspector gave testimony to the State Harbor Commissioners concerning the condition of the slip between Piers 22 and 23 (17 and 18): "In the neighborhood of markets, the docks fill very rapidly from the discharge of offal, decayed vegetables, and oyster shells....At Fulton market, large quantities of decayed fish are thrown into the slip which serve to fill it [New York State 1857:277].

Another official asserted that the condition of the wharves was a "serious evil to the interests of commerce" and

"to the health of the city...especially the condition of the piers adjoining all the ferries around the city (Pier 17 was one such pier): they are protected on the ferry side from observation by high fenders extending the length of the piers and elevated six to ten feet above them, those piers are covered with nightsoil, which is never removed except by the rains, and causes intolerable stench. The piers of the city are generally covered with mud from three to four inches in depth [Ibid.:294].

Besides being filthy, the piers were also in bad repair because of the way cargo was loaded and unloaded. Earlier, this work had been done manually. In the 1850s, it was generally done by horse, except at Pier 23 (18) where the operators of the "Black Line (sic) of Liverpool" used steam power [Ibid.:291]. When horses were used, holes were "bored in the posts to drive through an iron bolt to be attached to a derrick and they are bored in the flooring of the pier to attach a block" [Ibid.:293]. The piers were thus riddled with holes, making them dangerous as well as dirty. The damage to piers was made by horse shoes and the dragging of pig iron so that the wood flooring of the piers lasted only four to five years [New York State 1857:1859a].

Wharf owners contended that low wharfage rates were the cause of these conditions. The fees had not been increased since early in the century, when they were first established. In support of their claim, they cited an 1854 report of the New York City Comptroller which state "we have adhered to low rates of wharfage to keep up the name of the cheapest port on the continent, until we have literally run the shipping into the mud" [New York State 1859a:3].

Opposing the petition of the wharf owners was that of the shipowners and the Chamber of Commerce (New York State 1859b). They contended that the expense of building and maintaining the wharves and bulkheads was minimal in comparison with the wharfage revenues resulting from the increased volume of

of shipping in New York harbor. They asserted,

"This wharf property, thus held by private owners, is of great value, and seldom changes hands; is rarely for sale like other real estate or leasehold property; it is difficult to procure; capitalists seek for it, and it probably yields a larger revenue on the original cost and outlay, than any other description of real estate in the city" [Ibid.:3].

This assertion gains some support from the title data presented in the 1903-1905 condemnation proceedings for the privately-owned half of Pier 23 (18). Title was traced through wills back to Peter Schermerhorn second, in some cases, suggesting that this was indeed valuable property which remained in the hands of descendants of earlier property owners [New York County 1903]. In 1856, the city owned half of Piers 22 (17) and 23 (18) and the bulkhead between them, valued at \$125,000.00. In 1905, half of Pier 23 (18) was condemned for more than \$106,000.00. The value of the piers derived from the activities occurring on them and around them.

Market business was one of the major activities here. The Fulton Market, completed in 1821, was a general market. It had been built to replace the existing fish market which was cramped and "particularly offensive" in the warm months because "the common sewer which empties into the East River passes under" [New York City 1916, vol. 8:396]. In 1835 or 1836, a separate building was constructed on the waterfront to be entirely devoted to the fish trade. Small vessels, such as those used for fishing, found greater shelter in the East River than in the Hudson. This may account for the East River location of the fish business.

The site of Pier 17 was also used by the ferry to Brooklyn. Beekman Slip, the ferry terminus, was renamed Fulton Street in 1816 in honor of Robert Fulton, who operated the first steam-powered ferry here [New York City 1917, vol. 7:398]. Under New York State law, this was the only ferry which was permitted to run from Manhattan to Long Island [New York State 1835]. Then in 1835, petitioners to the state pressed for permission to run more ferries to Brooklyn [New York State 1835:3-7]. Conditions on the Fulton ferry were cause for considerable complaint. The state's report on the petition noted, "The crowd and pressure of foot passengers, freight, cars, and carriages of all descriptions at the Fulton ferry, render the crossing at all times inconvenient, difficult, and even dangerous" [Ibid.:4]. Even with new competition, the Fulton ferry terminal was a bustling site in the mid-1800s. In 1863, a cast-iron ferry building was constructed between Piers 21 and 22 [Johnson & Lightfoot 1980:40].

Then, in 1869, a new Fulton Fish Market building was erected at Pier 18 (formerly Pier 23). The old 1836 fish market, which had been rebuilt in 1847,

was demolished to make room; the old general market building remained alongside the new structure. The expanded fish market included floating fish cars which kept fish cold in the East River. Cranes were used to hoist fish up to the market stalls in the building (see photocopies of etchings).

Besides fish and ferry business, other users shared this sites. Commuter steamboats from Harlem, Astoria, and Norwalk, Connecticut, used Piers 22 and 23 (17 and 18) as terminals [Johnson & Lightfoot 1980:90-91]. Also docking here, beginning in 1818, were packet ships, such as those of the Black Ball Lines. By the 1840s, these transatlantic sailing vessels could not successfully compete with more efficient steamships and lost the business of the most profitable cargo and the wealthiest passengers. By the 1880s, the packet ships were no longer in business [Albion 1939:38-54].

Large steamships were easier to maneuver in the Hudson River than in the East River. Consequently, new docks were built to accommodate these ships on the western shore of Manhattan. As a result of this move, shipping company offices relocated to the west side of the city, as did much of the general market activity [Johnson & Lightfoot 1980:xii]. Thus, although the 1821 general market building at Fulton Street was rebuilt in 1882, the area had already begun to play a more limited role in the economy of the city by the closing decades of the 19th century.

Another shift in transportation technology also had an impact on activities in this area in the late 1800s. Elevated trains began to replace steamboats as a form of mass transportation for commuters. Ferries continued to operate until about 1924, but by the turn of the century, fish market business was emerging as the main activity at this site.

As part of an effort to bolster New York City's harbor activity, the local government attempted to gain control of the waterfront and rebuilt it around this time. Possibly as part of this effort, the fish market building was moved to an adjacent site to the north. In 1904, a new fish market was constructed at the original site. Again, fish cars and cranes were being used in the operation. In 1907, the fish market building to the north was demolished and a new one was built in its place. Pier 23 (18), it will be recalled, was condemned and rebuilt around this time. Pier 22 (17) was removed in 1905 and rebuilt in 1906 [New York City 1905, 1906]. The newly built piers, numbered 17 and 18, are still standing in 1981.

Within twenty-five years after the reconstruction of the fish market, the Fulton ferry was abandoned. The terminal building may have been torn down in preparation for the construction of a subway tunnel under the East River. With the removal of ferry operations, Pier 17, the former ferry pier, was partially rebuilt. Nonetheless, the piers were still in use, since 1926 documents refer to the fact that United Fruit Company occupied Pier 18 [U. S. Army 1926].

In the 1930s, the 1904 fish market building collapsed and was replaced by a building which still houses the fish market in 1981. In the 1940s, another technological change affected the site. The introduction of refrigerator trucks meant that fish did not have to be transported by boat to the market to insure freshness. Refrigerator trucks could carry fresh fish from New England and southern points to Fulton Street more cheaply than could fishing boats.

The fish market continued to thrive after World War II and, in the 1950s, a new fish market building was constructed on the site of the general market. This the first time the fish market was built on an inland site, a reflection of the fact that the business was freed from its former dependence on the waterfront. The piers now served as parking space for cars and trucks coming to the market.

A variety of vessels can still be seen anchored alongside the piers: a reinforced concrete barge dating from World War I, an occasional sailboat or fishing boat, a former hospital ship. The city, having no use for the piers, allowed them to deteriorate and, in 1918, the piers are again scheduled for demolition and reconstruction, as part of a plan to restore some of the economic activity which once occurred at the site.



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